

Fair Housing Questionnaire for Candidates, 2021:

1. **Have you ever seen or personally experienced discrimination in housing (either in renting, buying, or getting a mortgage)? What did you observe, how did you handle it, and how did you feel about it?**

Katjana Ballantyne, Candidate for Mayor

My personal experience, with housing discrimination includes more than twenty years of work with people living in vulnerable communities who are often denied housing unfairly. I've seen the hardship caused by discrimination in housing first hand and in response I've volunteered, advocated, worked and legislated solutions to make access to safe housing affordable and fair. I've volunteered and worked in neighborhood development corporations, and as an elected official, to help my neighbors to have better access to education and job opportunities so that they would, in turn have access to safer housing, to food security and affordable living costs. In 2001 I began what would become two decades of working for social equity, including housing as a human right, when I started working at Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation (JPNDC) to help residents of vulnerable, urban communities to have access to job training, jobs and career ladders. I continued this work as a volunteer member, a board member and as the board president of Somerville Community Corporation (SCC) where I also advocated and worked to create affordable housing and to provide programs to give residents better access to jobs, job training, housing and food security.

In eight years as an elected official, as an alderman, as a councilor and as the president of the city council, I have sponsored, supported and voted for many initiatives to make housing and Somerville more affordable such as, Inclusionary Zoning requiring 25% affordable units in new housing development, The 2000 Homes Program, The Ordinance for Condo Conversion, The Office of Housing Stability, The Jobs Creation and Retention Trust Fund, The Talent Equity Playbook, The Community Land Trust, the work of the Fair Housing Commission and more. As mayor, I will continue my leadership on these and more initiatives to make housing more affordable and more fairly accessible.

Mary Cassesso, Candidate for Mayor

While I personally have not experienced discrimination in housing, I have worked at the State's Housing Office and in safety-net services for decades and have heard countless stories of discrimination from people of color being discriminated. I want to help ensure that there is equity, inclusiveness, and fairness, as well as support services from nonprofit agencies and the City so that anyone who lives in Somerville will have access to affordable housing. This is why I have served on the Affordable Housing Trust Fund for several decades. We created programs that can assist on issues of mediation and wrap-around housing services. The City's Housing Stability office has enriched resources available as has nonprofit agencies like CAAS and the Homeless Coalition to provide assistance and support to low-income and diverse families seeking housing assistance.

Will Mbah, Candidate for Mayor:

I have been a victim of housing discrimination before. I do not want to go into personal details, but this past year I was forced to leave the apartment my family and I were renting.

Charlotte Kelly, Candidate for City Council At Large:

I have rented in cities across Massachusetts and around the world. Often I have discussed with roommates, friends, and community members the different experiences and struggles that many of us have faced when looking for housing. As a queer renter, my partner and I have always worried that landlords would potentially not want to rent to us because we are a queer couple. There have been moments when my partner (who is trans) has been misgendered by landlords and brokers or when we were treated like roommates rather than a couple, when we know the same would not be true if we were a straight cis couple. These types of microaggressions often get swallowed and internalized by tenants. We are afraid to address them because our housing stability or access to housing is on the line, and we don't want to jeopardize it further. These interactions are a reminder of how tenants and renters live in constant anxiety of doing something that may displease a landlord, which can potentially lead to leases being non-renewed, having rent increased, or worse. In addition to the interactions, landlords in Somerville often require first and last months' rent and a security deposit, as well as a broker fee. Queer people often face higher rates of unemployment and underemployment and, in some cases, have been cut off from familial support, which all makes the financial burden of providing these large sums of money up front even harder for us to afford. Whether it is the microaggressions or blatant homophobia in the search process or the financial barriers queer people face, finding and maintaining stable housing free from anxiety here in Somerville has been a real challenge.

Justin Klekota, Candidate for City Council At Large:

Discrimination in housing is never acceptable, and I thank the Somerville Fair Housing Commission for their valuable work receiving complaints from members of our community about housing discrimination in Somerville and providing legal references to them. To the best of my knowledge, I have not personally experienced housing discrimination. As a City Councilor, I am committed to working with Somerville residents and our City Commissions to advance the cause of justice in housing, employment, City services, our schools, and beyond.

Kristen Strezo, Councilor At Large:

I live in affordable housing. I am aware that housing discrimination exists and my goal as a City Councilor is to do everything I can to end housing discrimination in Somerville. I know that lower-income tenants face barriers to housing. I have experienced situations as a renter, though I know my experience may be different from others.

When I first moved into affordable housing, I had two kids under the age of five, and also lived with my 94 year old grandmother so that I could take care of her. It took my intergenerational family YEARS to find an affordable and accessible unit. Because our children were under five, the unit had to be deledaded before we could move in. Sometimes landlords did not want to have a family in the unit because they did not want to pay for the deleading. I experienced that several times. On the rental market, there were sometimes realtors or landlords and management

companies that would ask immediately if I had children; and then state that they had no units available when I responded that I do have children.

Another barrier was the high initial cost to rent market-rate, which sometimes adds up to nearly \$10,000 dollars to rent a unit (first and last month's rent, security deposit, broker's fees). I know there are so many other families and Somerville residents who experience this same financial burden.

Additionally, our family had to find a home that was ADA accessible. Finding an affordable first floor apartment or an apartment with elevator access was virtually impossible to accommodate my Grandmother's ADA needs. My Grandmother needed a walker.

My family had to literally win an affordable housing lottery to get a unit that was affordable, large enough for a family, and ADA accessible. From this experience, I learned first-hand the struggles that families face in affordable housing; how hard it is to find an affordable unit that fits the needs of children, families, and residents with disabilities; how stressful and long the process of securing affordable housing can be; and the difficult decisions that many families make in our community to avoid displacement.

We also have a lot of work to do to address racism within housing. The American housing system is structurally racist, with a history of discriminating against people of color. Our immigrant population and undocumented immigrant population has faced intense displacement during COVID. Some undocumented residents are afraid to speak up against discrimination. There are deeply unfair housing laws that residents must navigate, and discrimination on the basis of race within the housing system is prevalent. I am committed to doing all I can to end this structural racism and discrimination NOW.

As a City Councilor, I am committed to ensuring that Somerville residents have access to equitable, fair, safe, accessible, and affordable housing. In my first term, I have placed an important focus on affordable housing and housing issues, advocating for a more equitable city and Commonwealth. I have taken on--and will continue to take on--housing discrimination, have worked to ensure that tenants know their rights, and have fought against displacement and evictions. As the Chair of the Housing and Community Development Committee, I have supported and worked with the Know Your Rights Coalition and worked alongside the Office of Housing Stability. There is so much work left to do to guarantee fair, affordable, and accessible housing in our community. I will continue on the work for Fair Housing in a second term.

Tracey Pratt, Candidate for City Council At Large

I have both seen and personally experienced discrimination in housing. The first experience I observed in the mid 1980s in Queens, New York. I was not even 20 years of age and visited with my grandmother who owned her home in queens. She rented out one of her bedrooms to a woman who was from The island of Jamaica. The woman had been with my grandmother for about 9 months, secured a job and had saved enough money to rent her own apartment so that

she could bring her children to New York. She had me help her look for apartments in the newspaper and when she saw an advertisement she liked, she had me make the calls for her. When I asked her why she wanted me to make the calls, she said it was because I'm an American and I speak "white" English. I proceeded to make several calls for her. Each call started off promising. I was told the 2 bedroom apartments were still available. The potential landlords would follow up with questions I had to relay to the woman who wanted to rent. When they heard the woman's voice in the background they made statements like,

“Only 2 people are allowed in the apartment!”

“She can't bring her family here!”

“I don't rent to West Indians”

I told the woman who made the latter statement that in the newspaper advertisement, it says equal opportunity housing. The woman on the phone told me she did not care, her apartment was no longer available.

The discrimination I face in my own housing journey is a bit more subtle and harder to pin point but it's still there. It's the systemic racism that, as an African American woman, I have fallen victim to every day of my life. Long story short, my mother was married with 3 children by the time she was 23 years old and divorced by the time she was 30. We lived in rentals throughout my childhood and into my adulthood. We never had issues renting apartments and I don't feel I faced discrimination as I became an adult and became a renter myself.

For me, the discrimination came in as I dared to dream of owning my own home. Racism is about power and control so the first hurdle I had to overcome was my own self doubt, perpetrated by a racist system. I had to believe that as a single black woman, I can own a home. Then I had to face the discrimination in the system regarding credit scores and bank loans. My first attempt to purchase a condo was in early 2009. I was going to purchase a condo on Tufts street here in Somerville. I followed every process, did everything I was supposed to do. I was prequalified and preapproved for my loan with Bank of America. Five days before I was supposed to close on my home, the bank didn't do a final approval of my loan. I was devastated and figured I'd be a renter forever. Six months later, at my aunt's urging I regrouped and decided to try it again. The second time was a charm and the process went very quickly. I closed on my condo on Bonair Street on December 30, 2009 and continue to proudly live here today.

Some people may think, big deal, she purchased a condo. I was 44 when I purchased my home. I'm a single woman with no dependents. My white counterparts in my situation were able to purchase their first homes about 15 years before I was able. I recently had a conversation with neighbors about refinancing. I did refinance, but my white neighbors were offered more than a full percentage less than my interest rate. These are the hidden discriminatory factors that are sometimes overlooked and it's frustrating.

Virginia Hussey, Candidate for City Council At Large:

I was born and raised in Somerville, and was still living with my parents when I joined the military right after high school. In 2006 I was honorably discharged from the US Army as a disabled retired veteran. I returned to Somerville and was homeless. Four months later, I discovered I was pregnant and started to navigate the affordable housing process with no assistance. I put my name on lists for the Housing Authority and for the inclusionary lottery apartments but wasn't able to find housing in Somerville. Still couch surfing, I finally got assistance from Cambridge. They didn't have apartments or Section 8 vouchers available, but they connected me with the Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program (VASH), which gets veterans Section 8 vouchers through HUD.

I thought that this would be the end of my journey, but it was impossible to find landlords willing to take a voucher. I would see apartments and start applications, only to hear that the apartment was mysteriously already rented when the voucher information came to light. This happened three or four times, and I got two extensions on the voucher as it came close to expiring. I wanted to stay in Somerville not only to be close to family, but also because I was on the list for police and fire. Both of them require you to be a Somerville resident. Finally I was out of extensions and had to find a place in a hurry so I didn't lose the voucher. I finally found an apartment, but it was in Stoneham. The 6 months I lived there ultimately disqualified me for the police force when my name came up on the list.

My son was an infant, and I was now living a half hour from my support system, his daycare, and I had to get a car. Because my dad was a tow-truck driver, my dad was able to help me borrow a car until I was able to afford one. The process of finding this apartment was demeaning, and changed how I would present to people in all situations, thinking I wasn't good enough. I was also dealing with the pressure of being a new, single mom, as well as my disability, and, like many veterans I was dealing with PTSD.

Willie Burnley, Jr., Candidate for City Council At Large

Thank you for this question. As a Black and queer renter - whose name is literally on list of names [found to face racist employment discrimination](#) - I know how pervasive systemic discrimination of various forms are. One of the difficult things about identifying housing discrimination is that, as an individual, the system may not appear to deny you housing or a loan for housing explicitly based on your protected class(es). However, we know that this is happening and have found collaborative ways of combating it.

As a former intern at the Equal Rights Center, a civil rights non-profit that "seeks to eliminate unlawful and unfair discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations," I handled intake calls from across the country pertaining to housing discrimination. For months, I heard from people who had been unlawfully evicted, people whose landlords allowed them to face harassment because they were transgender, and I informed people about their accommodation rights under the ADA. The dire circumstances that people told me about in these situations were heartbreaking. In my role, I did my best to connect folks with local fair housing

agencies that could more directly assist them. Additionally, I also was trained in practices to identify housing discrimination and performed a rental check to see if property agents would give me - a Black man - different information than they would give someone who was white. However, we know that discrimination that impacts the ability for a person or family to acquire housing is not limited to renters; it also exists for home-buyers.

We know that [in 2017](#), for example, 350 white Somerville residents received loans to buy a home as compared to 13 Latino/a/x residents and only 3 Black residents. This incredible lending discrepancy is consistent throughout the past few years, is the legacy of redlining in our community, and is one of many driving factors of the racial wealth gap. As a City Councilor, I am committed to working with my colleagues to do as much as we can to close these gaps and end the various avenues of housing discrimination. This will be a continuation of my lifelong work to root out systemic oppression.

JT Scott, City Councilor, Ward 2:

I've seen many friends struggle with housing discrimination of various types - and the remedy of "filing a civil rights complaint with the AGO" just isn't a reasonable solution for people currently in an unstable housing situation, which is when many housing searches occur. Speaking for myself, when searching for housing in Somerville I absolutely encountered landlords who wanted to be reassured that we had no children - and wanted reassurance that our family had no intention of having children - before signing a lease. This is a violation of state and federal Fair Housing law. I felt that I had to make a choice between personal honesty and being unable to secure housing. I felt, and still feel, both saddened by the experiences that so many tenants face from casual discrimination and angered that these practices are so widespread and generally perceived as "acceptable".

Ben Ewen-Campen, City Councilor, Ward 3:

I was raised in a house where the issue of racism in the housing market was front and center: my dad's career focused on racial disparities in the mortgage lending industry in Massachusetts. Each year, he published a report outlining state-wide patterns of mortgage lending, broken down by race (<http://mcbc.info/publications/changingpatterns-xxv/>). And each year, the racial disparity data was worse than the last: "...in 2017, the denial rates on...home-purchase loan applications by Blacks and Latinos were much higher than the corresponding denial rates for whites." Across the state, the lion's share of home loans to Black and Latino families were concentrated in a small number of cities and towns, and loans in the rest of the state went overwhelmingly to white buyers. In this regard, Somerville is typical: while 350 mortgages went to white buyers in 2017, only three went to Black buyers. The data and the stories paint a clear picture that housing discrimination is widespread in Somerville and across the state and country.

While I have not personally experienced housing discrimination, as a resident and as a City Councilor, I have heard countless first-hand stories of illegal housing discrimination in Somerville, and I know that it takes many forms. I have heard from recent immigrants living in

tightly packed rooming houses barely fit for human habitation, suffering pest infestations yet too scared to make formal complaints against their landlords. I have heard from many, many couples turned down for an apartment after a real estate agent or landlord sees a young child – and in some cases explicitly told that a given landlords would not rent to families with children – on account of the cost of lead mediation. I know of landlords who won't rent to students, and others who will only rent to students of certain Universities. Housing discrimination is commonplace in Somerville, and takes many forms.

Beatriz Gómez Mouakad, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

During my work as a Project Manager for an Affordable Housing Community Corporation I would pre-approve potential homeowners for a mortgage application to avoid the initial bank fee should they not be eligible. During that process I would encounter residents who due to their immigrant status would not qualify for a mortgage. These were hardworking individuals who could not achieve the dream of owning a home. I unfortunately had to tell them they did not qualify and would offer them the option of applying for an affordable housing rental unit if it meant an improvement to their current conditions. It was frustrating and heartbreaking to see individuals who were contributing to our economy unable to reap the benefits of homeownership.

Tessa Bridge, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

When I initially moved to the Boston area my partner and I were rejected from many apartments because we weren't "reliable earners" and landlords weren't "comfortable" with renting on our starter salaries. This challenge of finding housing as a young person in this city is all too common and often blocks people from putting down roots in our community. As we grew our family we also struggled to find housing that would work for a family of four in our budget, and almost left the city because we could not find adequate housing that we could afford. We are incredibly fortunate to have been able to purchase our home and build stability here in Somerville, and I am committed to making that possible for as many other residents as possible. I have not personally experienced discrimination due to my identity but I have supported people who have been in that situation. I have seen friends, co-workers, and families I've organized with (many of color) treated poorly and asked inappropriate questions by realtors and landlords when touring apartments, be rejected from apartments for suspect reasons, and struggle to find accommodation that fits the needs of their families. Many people who have tried to set down roots in Somerville have been forced to move to other communities due to discriminatory housing practices and general unaffordability. When I and others I care about have been in these situations it feels awful, dehumanizing, and desperate. These experiences, which are all too common, are part of why I am running for the city council. There is so much more we can do as a city to ensure that people who want to live in Somerville can! Currently, there are far too many barriers to accessing adequate, accessible, and well-maintained housing and I am committed to taking bold steps to change that.

Todd Easton, City Council candidate, Ward 5:

My now-wife, Debbie, and I were looking to rent an apartment in the area when we first moved to Greater Boston. We were rejected at the time because we were an unmarried couple. While we were surprised and disappointed and angry, we felt there was nothing we could do about it at the time.

Alexander Anderson, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

No, I personally have not experienced discrimination in housing. And, I have not observed discrimination in housing for others directly. However, I believe that housing discrimination is real and is another expression of system racism, classism, sexism, ablism, and many other types of oppression. I also believe that there are at least two types of housing discrimination (and all expressions of oppression): 1) intentional and explicit forms of discrimination, and 2) unintentional or unaware and implicit forms of discrimination.

People who identify with historically marginalized groups – people of color; women; people living on no, low, or middle incomes; people with disabilities; people who speak a language other than English; pregnant people and families; and many others – experience discrimination and inequities in all of our systems. And, I believe that the intersection of multiple identities (ie. the intersection of race and gender and national origin) creates different experiences for different people. I believe housing discrimination is one of the harmful results of systems of oppression (ie. racism, classism, sexism, ableism)

In a housing environment like Somerville's – where our housing supply varies from 100+ year old unsafe and unhealthy housing units to well maintained housing units with their original frames to modern rebuilds and gut renovations; where our demand for home purchases and for many rentals exceeds the available supply of housing units; where the affordability of our entire community continues to outpace the growth in income and wealth for too many people and families – we must be more aggressive in ensuring fair and equitable housing access to folks who currently live here and those who want to move here to join our community – not just high income individuals and families.

I believe we cannot have a truly thriving community unless we have an equitable community. I believe City Councils have an obligation to account for the history of housing discrimination at the hands of local policies, rules, and regulations and work aggressively to implement better local policies, rules and regulations to ensure that our community is feasible for families of all backgrounds.

Becca Miller, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

I can't remember ever been discriminated against or observed discrimination while looking for housing.

Judy Pineda Neufeld, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

I have seen a member of my immediate family face discrimination when applying for a loan to buy a house because of the color of her skin, and it was a truly infuriating experience. As a candidate with this lived experience I will do everything in my power as City Councilor to ensure that housing discrimination has no place in Somerville.

Maria Koutsoubaris, City Council candidate, Ward 7:

If I had seen any discrimination I would have immediately reported it to assist the victim. Not all victims know their protected rights to fair housing and basic treatment as human beings. I have heard horror stories and can not even imagine how someone in a position to help others would treat them unfairly.